

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Hearing Date: March 25, 2021 8:00 AM

Printed on: March 25, 2021 6:16 PM

COMMENTS FOR: HB 1259

---

Judith McGeary

Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance

Cameron, TX

The Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance (FARFA) supports HB 1259. Our rural communities continue to struggle with a shortage of veterinarians. While there is no magic bullet for this problem, expanding the Rural Veterinarian Incentive Program is a positive step. The growth of the peri-urban communities has meant that many counties have populations that exceed the current 50,000 person population threshold for the program, yet they still need greater access to veterinary services. In addition, allowing veterinarians who have roots in Texas but went to vet school outside of the state will provide more options, ultimately benefiting the Texas communities that they settle in. FARFA urges the committee to approve HB 1259.

---

Kaitlyn Wofford

self, veterinary student

Krugerville, TX

The rural veterinarian incentive program should be established. As a veterinary student, I currently intend to pursue mixed animal practice, but I am very aware that I will graduate with a high amount of student debt and that rural veterinarians are less likely to make as much money as their urban companion animal counterparts. Establishing the incentive program would help allow veterinary students, including myself, to go into rural practice while successfully managing student debt from veterinary school.

---

Kynan Sturgess, DVM

Hereford Veterinary Clinic, TVMA

Hereford, TX

I had a significant hand in re-writing this legislation a couple of years ago as the old statute no longer works with 2 veterinary schools in our great state. Since the TAHC is already involved in selecting areas of the state that are underserved for USDA, it only made sense to make them more involved in selection of candidates to receive any state funding that can be budgeted. Getting another veterinary school will be very helpful in getting the right kind of candidates into the vet school to help serve these rural areas, but the other side of the equation is to find ways to help cut some of the costs involved. This bill along with funding of the program will be essential to help develop and incentives candidates to go to these areas of the state. I humbly ask for your support of this bill and to find some funding for the program as well.

Thank you,

Kynan Sturgess, DVM

---

Samuel Wilkinson, DVM

Wilkinson Veterinary Clinic

Alice, TX

Please include Jim Wells County in your list of counties. We need help attracting vets down here. We simply can't pay as well as

larger cities so we have a nearly impossible task of trying to get vets down here to practice.

The shortage of large animal veterinarians is a significant challenge for rural Texas. Veterinarians are the first line of defense against foreign animal diseases that could endanger our food supply and devastate the livestock industry.

Rural wages have not kept up with rising student debt, which is a key driver of these veterinary shortages. In 2018, average student debt for veterinarians who graduated with loans topped \$180,000. At the same time, food animal veterinary careers typically pay less than companion animal veterinary careers. This income disparity can make it financially challenging for new veterinarians who want to pursue opportunities in food animal medicine.

Loan repayment programs can address this income disparity by carefully selecting and incentivizing recent graduate veterinarians who want to serve in high-need areas by providing educational loan assistance in exchange for a commitment to practice food animal medicine in rural areas.

In both 2009 and in 2016 the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) published reports recommending that Texas should establish a loan repayment program for veterinarians who practice in rural communities on large animals to address the shortage in certain rural areas of the state. The reports noted that the state need for food animal veterinarians was not being met fully but that there were limitations to what higher education could do better to address this need since differences in salary figured prominently in veterinary practice trends. The Texas Legislature's House Committee on Agriculture and Livestock reached similar conclusions in their 2012 Interim Report to the 83rd Texas Legislature when they studied the adequacy of access to veterinary care in rural areas of the state.

---

Hope Flint

TVMA student member

College Station, TX

I am a veterinary student who is very interested in rural medicine and working on both small and large animals. I have worked as a student in a rural mixed practice in West Texas where there is a huge shortage of veterinarians for the animal population in the surrounding area and have seen how great the need is. I would like to return to these areas that need veterinarians once I graduate but the load of student debt I will be graduating with will not allow for this with the gap of rural wages compared to other positions. As I worked in a rural practice in West Texas, I started to see that when the clients weren't able to access a veterinarian they started to do more and more things themselves which often caused harm to the animals they were trying to help. There needs to be an incentive for future veterinarians like myself to go to these rural areas that are in desperate need of veterinarians to help serve the animals and communities there.

---

Morgan Hecht

Self/ DVM Student

College Station, TX

The State of Texas currently has a significant deficit of rural veterinarians. Rural practices cannot charge as much as suburban or urban practices, which is a problem for students that have to pay back debts incurred during veterinary school. Without an incentive, there will be fewer and fewer new graduate veterinarians moving into rural areas and those areas will continue to be underserved. Simply put, veterinarians cannot currently support themselves in a rural setting with the amount of debt they accumulate. The RVIP would help to change that.

---

Joe Scott Pace

Veterinary students

Bryan, TX

Far too many students begin veterinary school claiming they will become a rural veterinarian. However, by the time they graduate, their plans change due to the accumulated debt from education. It is no secret that, on average, small animal veterinarians serving urban areas have a higher income than mixed rural veterinarians. It is also not a secret that the demand for

mixed animal veterinarians in rural areas has become more demanding over the past few decades. To provide any kind of solution to this ongoing issue, the rural veterinarian incentive program needs to expand beyond the previous areas, in order to incite more graduating veterinarians to stick with their plan to become rural veterinarians. There are many areas that are in desperate need of rural veterinarians that the past incentive programs have not included. Expanding the counties in which the incentive program includes would have a very positive impact on the future of veterinary medicine.

---

Taylor Hudspeth

Self- Future Rural Veterinarian

Iola, TX

According to discussion with my fellow classmates and even graduated classes, one major lacking incentive for going to rural practice is the lower average salary but daunting student loans. With the student loan burden looming over new graduates, rural practice becomes an unattractive option even to those of us who came from rural areas. Many of us dream to be in rural areas, however, it does not currently make sense financially. The rural incentive program would help bridge the gap in salary for rural veterinary positions.

---

Bianca Gonzalez

Self, veterinary student

McKinney, TX

My name is Bianca Gonzalez and I am a current first year veterinary student at Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine. I plan to be a mixed animal practitioner and work in a rural area once I graduate. One of the main concerns for myself and many of my colleagues looking to practice in rural areas is the income to student debt ratio. For most of us, our income starting out in mixed or large animal practice will be significantly less than the amount of student debt we will be in as a new graduate. In order to limit the financial challenges and allow new graduates to focus on their learning and commitment to their rural community, we must provide financial support in ways that can not be properly met by the community itself. By providing relief of student debt to veterinarians while working in rural areas, this will allow future veterinarians such as myself to feel comfortable moving to an area in need of veterinary care with large amounts of student debt. Not only will this increase the amount of veterinarians that are willing to work in rural areas, but for those such as myself that are planning to build and own a private practice, it will open up the potential for further business and veterinary services in these rural areas in the future.

---

Hayley Morgan

Self-Veterinary Student

College Station, TX

There is a huge, unfulfilled demand for veterinarians in rural Texas areas today. The shortage of veterinarians in rural areas makes it more difficult for residents and producers in those areas to seek veterinary care for their animals, especially with large animal species. Additionally, a lot of our food-producing animals reside in these regions and veterinarians play a huge role in maintaining and protecting our food supply and Texas agriculture. If these animals can't find care within a timely manner due to the shortage of rural veterinarians, then this presents a huge risk to Texas food supply and agricultural industry.

The main reason for this deficit is the low wages found in rural areas compared to the tremendous amount of student debt newly graduated veterinarians are in. Although the new veterinary schools at West Texas A&M and Texas Tech will help by drawing attention to these areas, there still needs to be an incentive to drive new vets to those rural areas or else new graduates will continue to be drawn to larger cities with larger wages to pay off student loan debt. An incentive program, like mentioned in HB 1259 by Darby, would draw those much-needed large animal veterinarians to more rural areas.

---

Sean Jankowski

Self, Veterinary Student

Bryan, TX

I'm a second year vet student at A&M. I'm easily looking at having over six figures of student loan debt from my education costs for vet school alone. I am highly motivated to go into mixed animal practice, and I would like to be in a rural area. It is a deep concern for me to have to pay off my loans in a decent amount of time after graduating, so that I can own a house, have a family, and grow in my veterinary practice. I think it would be highly beneficial for there to be a way for students to be able to serve rural communities and have some of their loans compensated.

There is a natural wage disparity that exists between those who practice exclusively on small animals versus those who do mixed animal or large animal exclusive practice. When loan payments are looming over your head, the wages in small animal practice begin to look a lot more appealing. Practitioners are having to make choices to keep the lights on. Often, those choices include switching your career focus away from large animals. We need veterinarians in this state practicing on our livestock. This is an issue of public health, food security, and agricultural production. We are the biggest cattle producer in the nation. Veterinarians help those in 4-H and FFA with keeping their animals healthy. Veterinarians monitor diseases that can harm not only our animal populations, but potentially humans as well. In a state with a massive international border this disease monitoring is critical.

We need to be doing things to incentivize those who want to practice on livestock in rural areas. Those veterinarians help keep this state running at the top of its game. HB 1259 helps provide the incentives that we need. I strongly urge the members of the committee to support HB 1259.

---

Alyssa Hiatt

Self - veterinary student

Bryan, TX

I am a current veterinary student looking to join a rural mixed animal practice upon graduation. Although I am passionate about agriculture, protecting our food supply, and working cattle, joining a rural mixed is an uphill battle - I know I will take a dramatic pay cut over what I could make in a small animal practice, live in a rural area with less amenities, and work much longer hours than most small animal veterinarians. The combination of these three factors has made my decision to pursue a career in rural mixed practice difficult - especially with the massive cost of veterinary school and student loans looming overhead. An incentive program for rural practitioners would help decrease the shortage of rural veterinarians, decrease the workload of current rural practitioners, and assist us in paying back our student loans. The current veterinary loan repayment programs are helpful to recipients, but they seem to be few and far between. I am in full support of the implementation of a rural veterinarian incentive program and HB1259 to address our desperate shortage of rural veterinarians and make a small dent in the student loan crisis in veterinary medicine.

---

Tucker Roberts

Self, 1st Year Veterinary Student TAMU

Brownwood, TX

It is my opinion that the driving reason for the shortage of rural veterinarians is the lack of economic incentive to offset the amount of debt that we veterinary students now have to take on. It is not due to lack of interest as many claim and it is certainly not due to a lack of quality applicants. Many of us feel called to return to our rural communities to aid our livestock producers in the health and profitability of their herds. In my case there is no doubt that I will find my home somewhere in rural Texas, for others their circumstances might prevent them from following their passions. My grandfather who graduated from TAMU CVM in 1968 claims he was able to pay tuition, rent, groceries, and take my grandmother to the movies for less than \$150 a month. Today, I expect to be between \$100,000 and \$200,000 in debt. When I enter the workforce I expect to make less than six figures, far less than my companion animal colleagues. That does not deter me, but it deters many. The Texas State Legislature was moved by those trying to open the TTU CVM. Their mission is to get more food animal veterinarians in the work force, but I

worry that many of them will also be forced into the larger towns and cities due to the pressure of student debt. I now ask you to make that investment worthwhile by incentivizing Aggies and Red Raiders alike to return to the rural communities we wish to call home.

---

AnneClaire Huffman

Self

McGregor, TX

I support this bill because it would help meet the need of mixed animal and farm animal vets. I personally am trying to achieve the goal of becoming a mixed animal practitioner in the rural community of McGregor, Tx. Currently this community has no local veterinarian and I know producers in the area would greatly benefit from having a veterinarian closer to home instead of driving 45 minutes to Waco to have their livestock examined. If more support were given to help reduce the debt load of veterinarian students pursuing mixed animal or food animal medicine, it will have a positive impact on the rural communities in Texas that desperately need a local veterinarian.

---

Hannah Aloway

Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine

Waller, TX

My name is Hannah Aloway and I am a first year veterinary student. I hope to one day practice mixed animal medicine in rural Texas. This hope stems from the huge need for rural vets and my love for total Texas. Unfortunately, veterinary school results in a large amount of debt that cannot be paid off while working at a rural practice. Therefore, new graduates are being pushed toward cities even when they would prefer to practice rural medicine simply to pay off their mountain of debt. Strengthening the Rural Vet Incentive Program would allow more new graduates to follow their veterinary dream and practice rural veterinary medicine all while increasing the number of veterinarians available to rural Texas.

---

Hailey Drerup

Self

College station, TX

Being a Veterinary Student interested in pursuing large animal medicine in a rural town, I strongly support this bill. Too many students interested in large animal medicine are being driven to small companion animal medicine due to the surmounting debt and inability to pay loans back. There are students that WANT to fill the need of Texas, that are PASSIONATE, but are forced to seek employment where they can support themselves and pay their loans and usually that is NOT in the rural area or within large animal medicine. By providing loan assistance this can help bridge the pay gap between what large and small animal practitioners so that large animal practitioners can support themselves and their families as well as pay their loans and possibly be able to eventually be debt free just like their small animal counterparts.

---

Miranda Fuentes

Self, Texas A&M University's CVM Veterinary Student

Abilene, TX

As a current veterinary student and prospective rural veterinarian, I believe that it is important to provide incentive programs to those who serve in veterinary medically underserved rural communities. These communities rely on veterinary services ranging from general wellness of small animal medicine to management practices on the herd level for local producers. Rural veterinarians are the backbone of the community and are often the only veterinary clinic within a considerable distance and

usually operate at full capacity meeting the needs of the community. I have had a myriad of experience interning at several rural veterinary clinics and the practitioners that I meet rise before the sun and return home when it's already setting. These veterinarians love what they do, and are often involved in the community. I believe that these incentive programs will allow them to sleep at night, knowing that they can care for their student loan debt, and create a life for themselves and their families.

---

Victoria Burns

Self - DVM Student at Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine

Raymondville, TX

I believe this bill is essential in helping fill the void of rural vet medicine in many parts of our great state. This is needed to help out students and current veterinarians in Large Animal Medicine that are trying to pursue this pathway, but are being turned away due to the high percentage of student debt. Please help us help Texas.

---

Conrad Nightingale, Dr

Hill Country Veterinary Hospital

Bandera, TX

As a mixed animal practitioner for 47 years I find little or no interest in new graduates to move to this rural community and fill the void in this mixed practice as I anticipate an exit strategy. School debt and the possibility of repaying student loans appears to be one of the main concerns of students I have interviewed. Financial assistance could change this stumbling block for this practice and I support HB 1259 by Darby

---